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ABSTRACT

The Older Person's Counseling Needs (OPCN) Survey is used as an instrument to assess counseling needs of older persons in relation to their major life concerns. Four key areas of concern have been identified. These include personal, interpersonal, activity, and environmental concerns. These four areas have been subdivided to achieve 27 basic concerns of the elderly. The 54-item OPCN Survey assesses needs for counseling and attitudes towards needs for counseling in relation to these 27 areas. The survey, administered to a representative sample of 850 older persons in North Florida, reveals that certain groups of older persons have significantly higher needs for counseling than other groups and are thus identified as being "at risk" in terms of the provision of immediate counseling services. The importance of this information is related to further development and use of the OPCN Survey in the three major areas of selection, individual counseling, and program evaluation. (The survey instrument is not included.) (Author/PJC)

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Counseling Needs of Older Persons

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In order to maximize our limited resources for counseling with older persons, we must devise a means of identifying individuals or groups of individuals who are most in need of counseling, and serve these persons first. Additionally, the nature and types of their counseling needs should be identified as a step towards finding appropriate resources to meet these needs. One means of identifying a person needing counseling is the screening interview. This process can be time consuming, and success frequently depends on the level of skill of the interviewer as well as the length of time available to interview.

Another means of identifying persons needing counseling would be through the use of a survey instrument. When given to a large group, such an instrument would have the potential for identifying those members most in need of counseling services. These persons could then be selected for referral to whatever counseling resources were available. This proposed instrument could also be used as an intake aid when working with individual elderly persons. Responses to individual items would be reviewed to determine major problem areas. These areas would become focal points for discussion during the initial interview and further counseling sessions. This approach, that is to say, the discussion of identifiable and identified problem areas, would facilitate the establishment of rapport with the older counselee. Given that such an instrument would be useful, one might then ask, does one exist? Is there an available instrument to be used to assess counseling needs of older persons? If not, how might we develop one?

Certain available instruments, such as the Life Satisfaction Index and the Lawton Morale Scale, assess life satisfaction of older persons, but these represent a global approach to the problem and do not delineate specific needs. In day-to-day interactions we need something more specific, an instrument to assess needs for counseling in relation to major life concerns of older persons.

What, then, are the "major life concerns?" One of the most commonly used approaches to identifying major concerns of any group of persons has been the use of the personal/interpersonal dichotomy. Personal concerns of older persons might include death and dying, feelings of independence/dependence, health, and self-acceptance, especially concerning age related changes. Social/interpersonal concerns might include relationships with significant others, both friends and family, sexual needs, isolation and group memberships. These two categories do not exhaust the array of concerns facing older persons.

Retirement and withdrawal, whether they are voluntary or not, from the mainstream of society, create strong needs for meaningful activity and involvement. Activity concerns thus form a third area of need in the lives of the aged individual. Key areas of concern within this category are such things as adjusting to retirement, seeking or maintaining some type of employment, developing or maintaining satisfying hobbies and leisure time pursuits, participating in group recreational activities, and learning new skills.

Certain basic needs of older persons may be further identified, and these do not readily fit into any of the preceeding three categories. Physical limitations affecting some older persons create difficulties in carrying out housekeeping chores, shopping, meal preparation, and related

activities of daily living. Reduced incomes combine with declining physical reserves to restrict access to needed resources which may assist in the maintenance of independence. An example of this is public transportation. These concerns may be assumed under a fourth category of concern in the lives of older persons, which may be termed environmental concerns. Needs for adequate transportation and housing would fall under this category.

Having identified these major areas of concern, the next step is to assess whether or not older persons need counseling relative to each area. In order to accomplish this objective, an operational definition of counseling is needed. Counseling in its most basic form consists of talking with someone about their concerns or problems. Therefore, an expressed desire to talk to someone about a particular concern may be interpreted as a desire for counseling, or a need for counseling in that area.

This definition of counseling, and the four major areas of concern identified previously, formed the basis for the development of the Older Persons Counseling Needs Survey. This survey assesses counseling needs in 27 major areas of concern in the lives of older persons. As an example, a need for counseling may exist because a person has trouble making decisions. That person would then respond positively to an item which said "I would like to have help learning how to make decisions." A person having difficulty adjusting to retirement would presumably answer in the affirmative to an item which said, "I would like to talk to someone about getting used to being retired." And so on.

The final form of the survey actually consists of 54 items. The first 27 items assess expressed counseling needs and the second 27 items

assess attitudes towards the same 27 areas of concern. It is possible to either administer a 27 item subscale or the entire 54 item survey, and to use either group or individual administrations. The survey has a fifth grade reading level and takes 10 to 15 minutes for self administration. The Older Persons Counseling Needs Survey was field tested using a representative sample of 850 older persons in Florida. Several factors thought to be related to counseling needs were also examined. They included age, sex, race, marital status, income, education, employment status, living arrangement, and a few other variables.

The results reveal that certain groups of older persons have significantly higher needs for counseling than other groups. The importance of this fact is in knowing that these groups are potentially "at risk", and that they should therefore receive priority in terms of utilization of counseling services.

In general, groups of older persons who should be primary targets for counseling intervention include those who are single or widowed, members of ethnic minority races, those who live in the homes of relatives, friends, or adult congregate living facility operators, who have low levels of income, or who have low education. High counseling needs were generally related to living in either very rural or highly urban settings, and were most in evidence among native Floridians as opposed to seasonal visitors.

Perhaps the most interesting and significant finding of the study was the fact that persons evidencing needs in one area tended to evidence needs in numerous areas. When we interact as counselors with older individuals, we are attempting to intervene not so much in specific need areas, though this is frequently the case, but in general life areas, or life states. The approach to be used must be holistic and must consider the whole person.

Those of us who work in social service systems are aware of the reality constraints imposed by funding sources. We can provide legal counseling or help with meals, or housekeeping assistance. These services are vitally important, but they are not a panacea. Services must be integrated, coordinated, and comprehensive if we are to adequately meet the existing needs.

We are faced with the challenge of making maximum use of our limited resources. The Older Persons Counseling Needs Survey is but one instrument to help in this process. I will close by offering three possible uses for this instrument.

1. Selection - The survey can be administered to a large group of older persons. Those with the highest scores, showing the greatest need for counseling, can be selected and assigned to available counseling programs for individual or group counseling assistance.

2. Adjunct to Individual Counseling. The counselor may choose to review the questionnaire with the client. Responses to individual items may serve as key areas for the initiation of discussion of problems.

3. As a Program Evaluation Tool. Administering the survey to participants before and after providing services, or at the beginning and end of the fiscal year, and comparing the results, may reveal gaps in our present service delivery system.

This information must be available to policy makers if we are to affect services at the top ---- where the funding process begins.

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